

## Braley Testifies Before Budget Committee on Bush Budget's Impact on Veterans

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Braley "Surprised and Disappointed" At Bush's Proposed Cuts to VA, other Veterans Programs

Washington, Feb 28 - Today Rep. Bruce Braley (D-Iowa) testified before the House Budget Committee to discuss the impact of President Bush's proposed FY 2009 budget on the Veterans Administration and other veterans programs.

Braley has been an advocate for veterans and veterans issues in Congress. Braley was involved with hearings last year into substandard conditions for patients at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and launched a Congressional investigation last fall into the denial of GI Bill education benefits to members of the Iowa National Guard's 1st Battalion, 133rd Infantry after their return from the longest tour of duty in Iraq.

Braley's testimony before the committee follows:

Statement of Congressman Bruce Braley  
Committee on the Budget  
February 28, 2008

Thank you, Chairman Spratt and Ranking Member Ryan, for inviting me here to testify before your Committee today. I appreciate the opportunity to share my concerns about the impact the President's proposed Fiscal Year 2009 Budget will have on our nation's veterans, and to express my strong views that we in Congress must do everything that we can to ensure that we are sufficiently funding the Veterans Administration and properly caring for our troops, our veterans, and their families, both now and in the future.

It was just a year ago that I, like most Americans, was shocked and outraged to learn about the horrific living conditions, neglect, and bureaucratic hurdles that our veterans were experiencing at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. It was just a year ago that we learned that these problems were not confined to Walter Reed, but were widespread and systemic throughout the military and veterans healthcare systems. And it was just a year ago that President Bush went to Walter Reed, apologized to wounded soldiers, and promised to "fix the problem."

The scandal at Walter Reed served as a wake-up call that we as a country need to be doing much more to provide for our veterans who have sacrificed so much for us. Republicans and Democrats alike agreed that we needed to make significant and new investments in the VA. There was consensus that we needed to comprehensively change and improve the veterans healthcare and benefits system, so that veterans would never again have to face the mistreatment that so many experienced at Walter Reed and other VA facilities throughout the country. I thought that everyone "including President Bush" also understood that "fixing the problem" would require long-term investments and efforts, especially with the large number of veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with severe mental and physical injuries.

That's why I was so surprised and disappointed when I learned that the President's proposed Fiscal Year 2009 budget would inexplicably cut VA funding by billions of dollars in coming years. His budget would reduce funding for medical and prosthetic research, critical to the large number of veterans returning home with amputated limbs and mental injuries like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury, by millions of dollars. His budget would cut overall veterans funding by an astounding \$20 billion between 2009 and 2013, and would also increase healthcare fees and pharmacy co-pays for veterans.

These proposed deep cuts to veterans' services and healthcare, and increases in veterans' healthcare fees, are irresponsible and unacceptable. The cuts to prosthetic and mental health research threaten to deny our veterans the high quality of care they deserve not only when they first return home, but throughout their lifetime. In short, the President's proposed budget for veterans is a betrayal of American troops and veterans, and runs counter to the efforts and progress that Congress, the Defense Department, and the VA have made in the last year.

I am proud that Congress took the shame of Walter Reed and turned it into necessary and long-overdue action for our veterans through the bipartisan passage of critical bills like the Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act, and the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act. I was also proud to vote last year to give the VA the largest single funding increase in the 77-year history of the Department, an increase which will allow the VA to improve medical and mental health services and reduce delays in processing benefits.

However, the Joshua Omvig bill and the Wounded Warrior provisions will be meaningless without adequate resources. Similarly, the historic amount of funding we provided for the VA for 2008 will not go very far unless it is matched by similar appropriations in coming years. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, now is certainly not the time to cut veterans funding or backpedal on the progress we have made through these important new initiatives.

Unfortunately, I believe the President's budget follows a long trend of the Administration underestimating the true cost of the war in Iraq, and is a reflection of their failure to appropriately plan for the long-term. It is disturbing that the Administration is likely underestimating the number of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who will seek care in coming years, and consequently failing to request sufficient funding for medical care.

It is this very underestimation and the failure to plan for the amount of soldiers returning home with physical and mental wounds that have directly led to the VA's recent budget shortfalls. It is this underestimation and lack of planning that has led to uncertainty about whether the VA is going to close the VA Hospital in Knoxville, Iowa, where my brother works, causing the best employees there to leave and go to other facilities around the country. And it is this refusal to acknowledge the true long-term costs of the war and the true cost of taking care of our wounded soldiers which threatens to leave thousands of veterans without the long-term and high-quality care they deserve.

I am hopeful and confident that we have learned from past mistakes, and that Congress will reject these unconscionable cuts and fee increases. A rejection of the President's proposal is essential to ensuring that we continue to improve care for our veterans and that we provide them and their families with the best care, benefits, and treatment possible, now and throughout their lifetime.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify today. I look forward to working with you to ensure that we keep the promises we have made to our veterans, beginning with a Congressional budget that appropriately reflects the value of their service and the incredible sacrifices they have made for our country.